



*From “Wetland Program Development Grants (WPDGs) Case Studies”
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Nez Perce Tribe: *Developing a wetland inventory and assessment plan to help prioritize future wetland restoration*

Introduction

With about 3,200 members, the Nez Perce Tribe is the largest federally-recognized tribe in Idaho. The Nez Perce Tribe owns 86,248 acres of land, and individual tribal members own an additional 37,950 acres. The reservation encompasses prairies, forests, rivers and canyons. The farmland of the Camas Prairie makes up much of the south-central part of the reservation while forests cover mainly the eastern edge and the southwest corner. The Clearwater River runs through the north and east side of the reservation and tributaries to the River form steep canyons, dividing the reservation into six major watersheds, as well as six smaller ones. Though the land is mostly semi-arid, numerous wetlands are found at the headwaters of streams, depressions in the farmland and riparian zones of creeks and the River.

The Water Resources Division is one of six programs in the Nez Perce Tribe's Department of Natural Resources. Its mission is “to manage, protect, develop and restore the Nez Perce Tribe's surface and ground water resources and watershed environments in the treaty-reserved homelands for the benefit, health, culture and welfare of the tribal public.” One of the eight functions of the Water Resources Division is Water Quality Management, and a part of the Water Quality Management function is Wetlands Management.

WPDG Activity

The Water Resources Division first received a WPDG in 1995 to conduct preliminary work aimed at developing an integrated wetlands protection program. Wetland-related activities within the Division progressed in 2000 after a Wetlands Planner was hired and an additional WPDG was received from EPA. Under this grant, a wetland assessment methodology specific to the Reservation was developed. This grant activity complemented the work under a Five-Star Grant, received from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, which restored an 11-acre wet meadow near Winchester Lake.

The Water Resources Division received a subsequent WPDG for “Development of a Wetland Protection, Enhancement, Restoration and Management Program on the Nez Perce Reservation.” The funding was used to demonstrate the newly developed functional assessment method in two watersheds and initiate an inventory of wetlands resources on tribal land. A grant from EPA in 2003 allowed the Nez Perce Tribe to develop a plan to inventory and assess all wetlands on tribal land in the Lapwai Creek watershed, the largest on the Reservation. The following year, inventory and assessment planning expanded to include additional tribal wetlands in the Cottonwood Creek (Nez Perce Co.), Jacks Creek and Big Canyon Creek watersheds.

This series of development grants enabled the Nez Perce Tribe to document information on their wetland resources in a comprehensive manner. Adhering to wetland assessment methods developed by the Tribe, the following comprehensive list describes data that have been and continue to be collected: 1) location (directions to site, tribal unit number, section/township/range and watershed) and Hydrologic Unit Code; 2) type of water body; 3) wetland size; 4) classification of wetland by Hydrogeomorphic Method and Cowardin system; 5) land-use and impacts on wetland and buffer; 6) inventory of noxious and invasive weeds, culturally important plants and wetland plants with an estimate of percent cover for each species; 7) an evaluation of wildlife habitat (including suitability for beaver) and a record of wildlife observations; 8) potential wetland functions and values; and 9) management and restoration recommendations. A wetlands management plan, currently under development, will guide resource management activities in all departments and divisions of the Tribe. The Wetlands Planner is working diligently with the Fisheries, Watershed, Forestry and Land Services divisions to coordinate policies and activities.

Current Work and Future Plans

Wetland inventory and assessment efforts will continue on the reservation. The Nez Perce Tribe received a WPDG award in FY05 to complete wetland inventory and assessment for two large watersheds in the southeastern area of the Reservation, Lawyer Creek and Cottonwood Creek (Idaho Co.). Assessments for the remainder of the Reservation are expected to be completed during this fiscal year. Wetland assessments will be invaluable in prioritizing future wetland restoration projects. The Tribe also plans to finalize a comprehensive management plan to inform recommendations and guide decisions that affect wetland resources on the Reservation.

Please visit the Nez Perce Tribe website (<http://www.nezperce.org/>) for more information on the Tribe's history and to learn about how they are working to protect wetlands and other natural resources on the Reservation.

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Photo courtesy of Elisabeth Brackney (Nez Perce Tribe)